CRESSY

BY

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"THE LUCK OF ROARING CAMP," "MARUJA;" "TALES OF THE ARGONAUTS," "IN THE QUARQUINEZ WOODS," ETC.

WRITTEN FOR THE GAZETTE.

CHAPTER V.

WHILE this simple pastoral life was centered around the schoolhouse in the clearing broken only by an occasional warning pistol shot in the direction of the Harrison-McKinstry boundaries, the more business part of Indian Spring was overtaken by one of those spasms of enterprise peculiar to all Californian mining settlements. The opening of Eureka ditch and the extension of stage-coach communication from Big Bluff were events of no small importance, and were celebrated on the same day. The double occasion overtaxing even the fluent rhetoric of the editor of the "Star" left him struggling in the metaphorical difficulties of a Pactolian spring, which he had rashly turned into the Ditch, and obliged him to transfer the onerous duty of writing the editorial on the Big Bluff Extension to the hands of the Hon. Abner Dean, assemblyman from Angel's. The loss of the Hon. Mr. Dean's right eye in an early pioneer fracas, did not prevent him from looking into the dim vista of the future and discovering with that single unaided optic enough to fill three columns of the "Star." "It is not too extravagant to say," he remarked with charming deprecation, "that Indian Spring, through its own perfectly organized system of inland transportation, the conduence of its North Fork with the Sacramento river, and their combined influence into the illimitable Pacific, is thus put not only into direct communication with far Cathay, but even remoter Antipodean markets. The citizen of Indian Spring taking the 9 a. m. Pioneer coach and arriving at Big Bluff at 3:10 is enabled to connect with the through express to Sacramento the same evening, reaching San Francisco per the Steam Navigation Company's palatial steamers in time to take the Pacific Mail steamer to Yokohama on the following day at 3:30 p. m." Although no citizen of Indian Spring appeared to avail himself of this admirable opportunity, nor did it appear at all likely that any would, everybody vaguely felt that an inestimable boon lay in the suggestion, and even the master professionally entrusting the reading aloud of the editorial to Rupert Filgee with ulterior designs of practice in the pronunciation of five-syllable-words, was somewhat affected by it. Johnny Filgee and Jimmy Snyder accepting it as a mysterious something that made Desert Islands accessible at a moment's notice and a trifling outlay, were round-eyed and attentive. And the culminating information from the master that this event would be commemorated by a half holiday, combined to make the occasion as exciting to the simple school house in the clearing as it was to the gilded saloon in the main street.

And so the momentous day arrived, with its two new coaches from Big Bluff containing the especially invited speakers—always specially invited to those occasions, and yet strangely enough never before feeling the extreme "importance and privilege" of it as they did then. Then there were the firing of two anvils, the strains of a brass band, the hoisting of a new flag on the liberty pole, and later the ceremony of the Ditch opening, when a distinguished speaker in a most unworkmanlike tall hat, black frock coat and white cravat, which gave him the general air of a festive grave digger, took a spade from the hands of an apparently hilarious chief mourner and threw out the first sods. There were anvils, brass bands, and a "collation" at the hotel. But everywhere—overriding the most extravagant expectation and even the laughter is provoked—the spirit of indomitable youth and resistless enterprise intoxicated the air. It was the spirit that had made California possible; that had sown a thousand such ventures broadcast through its wilderness; that had enabled the sower to stand half humorously among his scant or ruined harvests without fear and without repining, and turn his undaunted and ever-hopeful face to further fields. What mattered it that Indian Spring had always before its eyes the abandoned trenches and ruined outworks of its early pioneers? What mattered that the eloquent eulogist of the Eureka Ditch had but a few years before as prodigally scattered his adjectives and his fortune on the useless tunnel that confronted him on the opposite side of the river? The sublime forgetfulness of youth ignored its warning or recognized it as a joke. The master, fresh from his little flock and prematurely aged by their contact, felt a stirring of something like envy as he wandered among these scarcely older enthusiasts.

Especially memorable was the exciting day to Johnny Filgee, not only for the delightfully bewildering clamor of the brass band, in which, between the trombone and the bass drum he had got inextricably mixed; not only for the half-frightening explosions of the anvils and the maddening smell of the gunpowder which had exalted his infant soul to sudden and irrelevant whoopings, but for a single occurrence that whetted his always keen perceptions. Having been shamelessly abandoned on the verandah of the Eureka hotel while his brother Rupert paid dashful court to the pretty proprietress by assisting her in her duties, Johnny gave himself up to unlimited observation: the rosettes of the six horses, the new harness, the length of the driver's whiplash, his enormous buckskin gloves, and the way he held his reins; the fascinating odor of shining varnish on the coach, the gold-headed cane of the Honorable Abner Dean; all these were stored away in the secret recesses of Johnny's memory, even as the unconsidered trifles he had picked up en route were distending his capacious pockets. But when a young man had alighted from the second or "truly" coach among the real passengers and strolled carelessly and easily in the veranda as if the novelty and the occasion were nothing to him, Johnny, with a gulp of satisfaction, knew that he had seen a prince! Beautifully dressed in a white duck suit, with a diamond ring on his finger, a gold chain swinging from his fob, and a Panama hat with a broad black ribbon jauntily resting on his curled and scented hair, Johnny's eyes had never rested on a more resplendent vision. He was more romantic than Yuba Bill, more imposing and less impossible than the Honorable Abner Dean, more eloquent than the master—far more beautiful than any colored print that he had ever seen. Had he brushed him in passing Johnny would have felt a thrill; had he spoken to him he knew he would have been speechless to reply. Judge then of his utter stupefaction when he saw Uncle Ben—actually Uncle Ben!—approach this paragon of perfection, albeit with some embarrassement, and after a word or two of unintelligible conversation walk away with him! Need it be wondered that Johnny, forgetful at once of his brother, the horses, and even the collation with its possible "goodies," instantly followed.

The two men turned into the side street, which after a few hundred yards opened upon the deserted mining flat, crossed and broken by the borrows and mounds made by the forgotten engines of the early gold-seekers; Johnny, at times hidden by these irregularities, kept closely in their rear, sauntering whenever he came within the range of their eyes in that sidelong, spasmodic and generally diagonal fashion peculiar to small boys, but ready at any moment to assume utter unconsciousness and the appearance of going somewhere else or of searching for something on the ground. In this way appearing, if noticed at all, each time in some different position to the right or left of them, Johnny followed them to the fringe of woodland which enabled him to draw closer to their heels.

CHAPTER VI.

Utterly oblivious of this artistic "shadowing" in the insignificant person of the small boy who once or twice even crossed their path with affected timidity, they continued an apparently confidential previous interview. The words "stocks" and "shares" were alone intelligible Johnny had heard them during the day, but he was struck by the fact that Uncle Ben seemed to be seeking information from the paragon and was perfectly submissive and humble. But the boy was considerably mystified when after a tramp of half an hour they arrived upon the debatable ground of the Harrison-McKinstry boundary. Having been especially warned never to go there, Johnny as a matter of course was perfectly familiar with it. But what was the incomprehensible stranger doing there? Was he brought by Uncle Ben with a view of paralyzing both of the combatants with the spectacle of his perfections? Was he a youthful sheriff, a young judge, or maybe the son of the governor of California? Or was it that Uncle Ben was "silly," and didn't know the locality? Here was an opportunity for him, Johnny, to introduce himself and explain and even magnify the danger, with perhaps a slight allusion to his own fearless familiarity with it. Unfortunately, as he was making up his small mind behind a tree, the paragon turned and, with the easy disdain that so well became him, said:

"Well, I wouldn't off'r a dollar an acre for the whole rancho. But if you choose to give a fancy price, that's your look out."

To Johnny's already prejudiced mind, Uncle Ben received this just contempt submissively, as he ought, but nevertheless he muttered something "silly" in reply, which Johnny was really too disgusted to listen to. Ought he not to step forward and inform the paragon that he was wasting his time on a man who couldn't even spell "Os-ker," and who was taught his letters by his, Johnny's brother?

The paragon continued.

"And of course you know that merely your buying the title to the land don't give you possession. You'll have to fight these squatters and jumpers just the same. It'll be three instead of two fighting—that's all!"

Uncle Ben's imbecile reply did not trouble Johnny. He had ears now only for the superior intellect before him. It continued coolly.

"Now let's take a look at that yield of yours. I haven't much time to give you, as I expect some men to be looking for me here—and I suppose you want this thing still kept a secret. I don't see how you've managed to do it so far. Is your claim near? You live on it, I think you said?"

But that the little listener was so preoccupied with the stranger, this suggestion of Uncle Ben's having a claim worth the attention of that distinguished presence would have set him thinking; the little that he understood he set down to Uncle Ben's "gassin'." As the two men moved forward again, he followed them until Uncle Ben's house was reached.

It was a rude shanty of boards and rough boulders, half burrowing in one of the largest mounds of earth and gravel, which had once represented the tailings or refuse of the abandoned Indian Springs Placer. In fact it was casually alleged by some that Uncle Ben eked out the scanty "grub wages" he made by actual mining, in reworking and sifting the tailings at odd times—a degrading work hitherto practiced only by Chinese, and unworthy the Caucasian ambition. The mining code of honor held that a man might accept the smallest results of his daily labor, as long as he was sustained by the prospect of a larger "strike," but condemned his contentment with a modest certainty. Nevertheless a little of this suspicion encompassed his dwelling and contributed to its loneliness, even as a long ditch, the former tail race of the claim, separated him from his neighbors. Prudently halting at the edge of the wood, Johnny saw his resplendent vision cross the strip of barren flat, and enter the cabin with Uncle Ben like any other mortal. He sat down on a stump and waited its return, which he fondly hoped might be alone! At the end of half an hour he made a short excursion to examine the condition of a blackberry bramble, and returned to his post of observation. But there was neither sound nor motion in the direction of the cabin. When another ten minutes had elapsed, the door opened and to Johnny's intense discomfiture Uncle Ben appeared alone and walked leisurely towards the woods. Burning with anxiety, Johnny threw himself in Uncle Ben's way. But here occurred one of those surprising inconsistencies known only to children. As Uncle Ben turned his small gray eyes upon him in a half astonished, half questioning manner, the potent spirit of childish secretiveness suddenly took possession of the boy. Wild horses could not now have torn from him that question which only a moment before was on his lips.

"Hullo, Johnny! What are ye doin' here?" said Uncle Ben kindly

"Nothin'." After a pause, in which he walked all round Uncle Ben's large figure, gazing up at him as if he were a monument, he added: "Huntin' blackberrieth."

"Why ain't you over at the collation?"

"Ruperth there," he answered promptly.

The idea of being thus vicariously present in the person of his brother, seemed a sufficient excuse. He leapfrogged over the stump on which he had been sitting as an easy unembarrassing pause for the next question. But Uncle Ben was apparently perfectly satisfied with Johnny's reply, and nodding to him, walked away.

When his figure had disappeared in the bushes, Johnny cautiously approached the cabin. At a certain distance he picked up a stone and threw it against the door, immediately taking to his heels and the friendly copse again. No one appearing, he repeated the experiment twice and even thrice with a larger stone and at a nearer distance. Then he boldly skirted the cabin and dropped into the race way at its side. Following it a few hundred yards he came upon a long disused shaft opening into it, which had been covered with a rough trap of old planks, as if to protect incautious wayfarers from falling in. Here a sudden and inexplicable fear overlook Johnny, and he ran away. When he reached the hotel almost the first sight that met his astounded eyes, was the spectacle of the paragon, apparently still in undisturbed possession of all his perfections—driving coolly off in a buggy with a fresh companion.

Meantime Mr. Ford, however, touched by the sentimental significance of the celebration, became slightly wearied of its details. As his own room in the Eureka hotel was actually thrilled by the brass band without, and the eloquence of speakers below, and had become redolent of gunpowder and champagne exploded around it, he determined to return to the schoolhouse and avail himself of its woodland quiet to write a few letters.

The change was grateful, the distant murmur of the excited settlement came only as the soothing sound of wind among the leaves. The pure air of the pines that filled every cranny of the quiet schoolroom and seemed to disperse all taint of human tenancy, made the far off celebrations as unreal as a dream. The only reality of his life was here

He took from his pocket a few letters—one which was worn and soiled with frequent handling. He re-read it in a half methodical, half patient way, as if he were waiting for some revelation it inspired, which was slow that afternoon in coming. At other times it called up a youthful enthusiasm which was wont to transfigure his grave and prematurely reserved face with a new expression. To-day the revelation and expression were both wanting. He put the letter back with a slight sigh, that sounded so preposterous in that silent room, that he could not forgo an embarrassed smile. But the next moment he set himself seriously to work on his correspondence.

Presently he stopped, once or twice he had been overtaken by a vague undefinable sense of pleasure, even to the dreamy halting of his pen. It was a sensation in no way connected with the subject of his correspondence, or even his previous reflections—it was partly physical, and yet it was in some sense suggestive. It must be the intoxicating effect of the woodland air. He even fancied he had noticed it before, at the same hour when the sun was declining and the fresh odors of the undergrowth were rising. It certainly was a perfume. He raised his eyes. There lay the cause on the desk before him—a little nosegay of wild California myrtle encircling a rosebud which had escaped his notice.

There was nothing unusual in the circumstance. The children were in the habit of making their offerings generally without particular reference to time or occasion, and it might have been overlooked by him during school hours. He felt a pity for the forgotten posy already beginning to grow limp in its neglected solitude. He remembered that in some folk lore of the children's, perhaps a tradition of the old association of the myrtle with Venus, it was believed to be emblematic of the affections. He remembered also that he had even told them of this probable origin of their superstition. He was still holding it in his hand when he was conscious of a silken sensation that sent a magnetic thrill through his fingers. Looking at it more closely he saw that the sprigs were bound together, not by thread or ribbon, but by long filaments of brown hair tightly wound around them. He unwound a single hair and held it to the light. Its length, color, texture, and above all a certain inexplicable instinct, told him it was Cressy McKinstry's. He laid it down quickly, as if he had in that act familiarly touched her person.

He finished his letter, but presently found himself again looking at the myrtle and thinking about it. From the position in which it had been placed it was evidently intended for him; the fancy of binding it with hair was also intentional and not a necessity, as he knew his feminine scholars were usually well provided with bits of thread, silk or ribbon. If it had been some new absurdity of childish fashion introduced in the school, he would have noticed it ere this. For it was this obtrusion of a personality that vaguely troubled him. He remembered Cressy's hair; it was certainly very beautiful, in spite of her occasional vagaries of coiffure. He recalled how, one afternoon, it had come down when she was romping with Ottavia in the playground, and was surprised to find what a vivid picture he retained of her lingering in the porch to put it up; her rounded arms held above her head, her pretty shoulders, full throat, and glowing face thrown back, and a wisp of the very hair between her white teeth! He began another letter.

When it was finished the shadow of the pine-branch before the window, thrown by the nearly level sun across his paper, had begun to slowly reach the opposite wall. He put his work away, lingered for a moment in hesitation over the myrtle sprays, and then locked them in his desk with an odd feeling that he had secured in some vague way a hold upon Cressy's future vagaries; then reflecting that Uncle Ben, whom he seen in town, would probably keep holiday with the others, he resolved to wait no longer, but strolled back to the hotel. The act, however, had not recalled Uncle Ben to him by any association of ideas, for since his discovery of Johnny Filgee's caricature he had failed to detect anything to corroborate the caricaturist's satire, and had dismissed the subject from his mind.

On entering his room at the hotel he found Rupert Filgee standing moodily by the window, while his brother Johnny, overcome by a repletion of excitement and collation, was asleep on the single arm chair. Their presence was not unusual, as Mr. Ford, touched by the loneliness of these motherless boys, had often invited them to come to his rooms to look over his books and illustrated papers.

"Well?" he said cheerfully.

Rupert did not reply or change his position. Mr. Ford, glancing at him sharply, saw a familiar angry light in the boy's beautiful eyes, slightly dimmed by a tear. Laying his hand gently on Rupert's shoulder, he said: "What's the matter, Rupert?"

"Nothin'," said the boy doggedly, with his eyes still fixed on the pane.

"Has—has—Mrs. Tripp" (the fair proprietress) "been unkind?" he went on ilgently.

No reply.

"You know, Rupe," continued Mr. Ford, demurely, "she must show some reserve before company—like to day. It won't do to make a scandal."

Rupert maintained an indignant silence. But the dimple (which he usually despised as a feminine blot) on the cheek nearer the master became slightly accented. Only for a moment; the dark eyes clouded again.

"I wish I was dead, Mr. Ford."

"Hallo!"

"O—doin' nuthin'."

"That's better. What do you want to do?"

"To work—make a livin' myself. Quit totin' wood and water at home, quit cookin' and makin' beds like a yaller Chinaman; quit nussin' babies and dressin' 'em and undressin' 'em like a girl. Look at him now," pointing to the sweetly unconscious Johnny, "look at him 'here. Do you know what that means? It means I've got to pack him home through the town jest as he is thar, and then make a fire and bile his frock for him, and wash him and undress him and put him to bed, and 'Now I lay me down to sleep' him, and tuck him up; and Dad all the while 'scooting round town with other fellers, jawin' about 'progress' and the 'future of Injin Spring.' Much future we've got over our own house, Mr. Ford. Much future he's got laid up for me!"

The master, to whom these occasional outbreaks from Rupert were not unfamiliar, smiled, albeit with serious eyes that belied his lips, and consoled the boy as he had often done before. But he was anxious to know the cause of this recent attack and its probable relations to the fascinating Mrs. Tripp.

"I thought we talked all that over some time ago, Rupe. In a few months you'll be able to leave school, and I'll advise your father about putting you into something to give you a chance for yourself. Patience, old fellow; you're doing very well. Consider—there's your pupil, Uncle Ben."

"Oh, yes! That's another big baby to tot round in school when I ain't niggerin' at home."

"And I don't see exactly what else you could do at Indian Spring," continued Mr. Ford.

"No," said Rupert gloomily, "but I could get away to Sacramento. Yuba Bell says they take boys no bigger nor me in thar express offices or banks—and in a year or two they're as good ez anybody and get paid as big. Why, there was a fellow here, just now, no older than you, Mr. Ford, and not half your learnin', and he dressed to death with jewelry, and everybody bowin' and scrapin' to him, that it was perfectly sickenin'."

Mr. Ford lifted his eyebrows. "Oh, you mean the young man of Benham & Co., who was talking to Mrs. Tripp?" he said.

A quick flush of angry consciousness crossed Rupert's face. "Maybe; he has just cheek enough for anythin'."

"And you want to be like him?" said Mr. Ford.

"You know what I mean, Mr. Ford. Not like him. Why you're as good as he is, any day," continued Rupert with relentless naivete; "but if a jaybird like that can get on, why couldn't I?"

There was no doubt that the master here pointed out the defectiveness of Rupert's logic and the beneficence of patience and study, as became their relations of master and pupil, but with the addition of a certain fellow sympathy and some amusing recital of his own boyish experiences, that had the effect of calling Rupert's dimples into action again. At the end of half an hour the boy had become quite tractable, and, getting ready to depart, approached his sleeping brother with something like resignation. But Johnny's nap seemed to have had the effect of transforming him into an inert jelly-like mass. It required the joint exertions of both the master and Rupert to transfer him bodily into the latter's arms, where, with a single limp elbow encircling his brother's neck, he lay with his unfinished slumber still visibly distending his cheeks, his eyelids, and even lifting his curls from his moist forehead. The master bade Rupert "good night" and returned to his room as the boy descended the stairs with his burden.

But here Providence, with, I fear, its occasional disregard of mere human morality, rewarded Rupert after his own foolish desires. Mrs. Tripp was at the foot of the stairs as Rupert came slowly down. He saw her, and was covered with shame; she saw him and his burden, and was touched with kindliness. Whether or not she was also mischievously aware of Rupert's admiration, and was not altogether displeased with it, I cannot say. In a voice that thrilled him, she said:

"What! Rupert, are you going so soon?"

"Yes, ma'am—on account of Johnny."

"But let me take him—I can keep him here to-night."

It was a great temptation, but Rupert had strength to refuse, albeit with his hat pulled over his downcast eyes.

"Poor dear, how tired he looks."

She approached her still fresh and pretty face close to Rupert and laid her lips on Johnny's cheek. Then she lifted her audacious eyes to his brother and pushing back his well-worn felt hat from his clustering curls she kissed him squarely on the forehead.

"Good night, dear."

The boy stumbled, and then staggered blindly forward into the outer darkness. But with a gentleman's delicacy he turned almost instantly into a side street, as if to keep this consecration of himself from vulgar eyes. The path he had chosen was rough and weary, the night was dark, and Johnny was ridiculously heavy, but he kept steadily on, the woman's kiss, in the fancy of the foolish boy shining on his forehead and lighting him onward like a star.

[To be continued next week.]